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# FROM THE DRAGON TO THE BEAST

## THE MARTIAL MONK AND VIRTUAL NINJA AS ACTUAL MARTIAL ARTISTS

## CHRIS GOTO-JONES

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## ABSTRACT

Navigating between society's moral panics about the influence of violent videogames and philosophical texts about self-cultivation in the martial arts, this extract from the monograph, *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto: Fighting Games, Martial Arts, and Gamic Orientalism*, asks whether the figure of the 'virtual ninja' can emerge as an aspirational figure in the 21st century, modeled on the 'event' of Bruce Lee. The work seeks to illustrate the argument that the kind of training required to master videogames approximates the kind of training described in Zen literature on the martial arts. It suggests that the shift from the actual dōjō to a digital dōjō represents only a change in the technological means of practice. It explores the possibility that, after Bruce Lee and Daigo Umehara, martial arts games can promote spiritual development.

Everything begins with Brucie, no? I love that scene when the master tells him that his skills have now moved beyond the physical to the spiritual level.<sup>1</sup> And I believe it too. Hong Kong movies don't lie to us, right? So, who wouldn't want to be Bruce Lee? But look at me ... I'm no Bruce Lee and I never will be.<sup>2</sup> And then I saw the Beast and I realised that I might be able to be Brucie after all ... I might be able to become a kung fu master. And not just like Carradine pretending to do it, but actually doing it.<sup>3</sup> Really fighting the bad guys with kicks and flips and shit. Really moving beyond to the spiritual level. Of course, then I tried *Street Fighter* and realised that I'll probably never be the Beast either...

- 3ddyG0rd0, Paris, France. 18 May 2013

Just to be clear from the start, this article is not an attempt to convince anyone that mastery of a martial arts videogame (MAV) like *Street Fighter* (1987) and mastery of a physical martial art like jeet kune do are identical accomplishments. Indeed, such a claim would be manifestly ridiculous in various ways. Perfecting the iconic *shōryūken* (rising dragon fist) with Ken or Ryū does not enable you to perform it in real life when someone takes a swing at you in the park; winning the *Street Fighter* tournament in the annual Evolution Championships does not mean that you could fight your way out of the proverbial wet paper bag in the real world.<sup>4</sup>

1 This scene appears in *Enter the Dragon* (1973).

2 I didn't press 3ddyG0rd0 on what were the specific attributes that he lacked. However, he was not of Chinese descent, he was not under 32, and he was not in optimal physical condition.

3 David Carradine became famous for playing the Shaolin monk Kwai Chang Caine in the television series *Kung Fu* (1972-1975). At the time, he was not a martial artist (although this show kickstarted his life-long interest in kung fu); the role was apparently designed for (and by) Bruce Lee himself. The show inspired many Americans and Europeans to take up the martial arts, largely because of the mystical climate of mastery that it associated with the arts via legends of the Shaolin monastery, and much less because of Carradine's performance of the martial arts themselves.

4 The *Evolution Championship Series* (or EVO) is an annual esports event focussed exclusively on MAVs. It is usually held in California, USA. It is the largest and longest running event of its kind. It has its roots in a *Street Fighter II* tournament in 1996, but became EVO in 2002. The number of participants, attendees, and viewers has grown consistently each year, as has the prize money.

To be clear, then, there should be no pretence that MAVs are *simulations* of the martial arts, nor thence that mastery of the simulation is closely related to mastering the simulated. MAVs are not training aids for kung fu students. Rather, I'm interested in exploring the extent to which MAVs are a form of *simulacrum* in the postmodern sense – they are martial arts in their own right, standing for nothing other than themselves. Indeed, the long-running *Virtual Ninja Project*, from which this article is drawn, seems to reveal that there is something about the meaning and nature of the idea of 'mastery' itself that can be shared across these disciplinary accomplishments, uniting them into some form of family resemblance.<sup>5</sup> Mastery appears to emerge as a special quality of ethical self-transformation that results from skilful practices that are properly intentioned, rigorously disciplined, and martially oriented.

This article seeks to explore the meaning and potential of a single *Street Fighter* episode – the legendary 'Beast Event' – as an exemplar of the overall approach adopted by the *Virtual Ninja Project*. Hence, this article stands on its own as an intervention, demonstrating the arguments developed by that project. In short, I suggest that this remarkable event represents a moment of transformation in the discourse and practice of both the martial arts and of videogames. Vitally, in the context of this special issue of *Martial Arts Studies*, this transformation emerges as an important aspect of the legacy of Bruce Lee.

Far from emerging from a cloudless sky, the 'Beast Event' of 2004 captured a cluster of cultural trajectories that included the martial arts boom, the digital revolution, New Wave science fiction and cyberpunk, and techno-Orientalism.<sup>6</sup> The role of Japan as an emblem of technoculture as well as the symbolic inheritor of the so-called 'bushido' tradition is essential to this case. Associated with this is the idea of the disciplined accomplishment of intuitive mastery of a set of controls and techniques. Part of the significance of this Japan-inflected event is the way that it enables a re-representation of the (Japanese) MAV as the inheritor of the modern spirit of the martial arts in a postmodern

5 The Virtual Ninja Project began in 2010 with an international survey launched in the gaming magazine *Edge*. After several years of fieldwork in game arcades around the world and follow-up surveys, the conclusions were published in *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* [Goto-Jones 2016], one of the launch volumes of the Martial Arts Studies book series edited by Paul Bowman [<https://www.mentalpraxis.com/virtual-ninja-project.html>].

6 This clustering is explored in Goto-Jones [2015, 2016].

age; the so-called 'Japanese ideology' is at work.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, then, this identity seems to invoke an ideological commitment (either voluntarily or otherwise) and hence creates space for a manifesto as an intervention into the discourse; such a manifesto for gamers was a central part of the larger project.<sup>8</sup>

## HOW THE DRAGON BECAME THE BEAST

As gamer 3ddyG0rd0 remarks, 'Everything begins with Bruce Lee, no?' Well, Bruce Lee is one of the most recognised names in contemporary history. It is no exaggeration to say that he changed the face of the martial arts, of the movie industry, and of Asian masculinity.<sup>9</sup> After the worldwide release of his landmark movie *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and his untimely death in the same year, Lee's legend was secure. He became an icon; his brief presence on the world stage was a transformative moment in the lives of people all over the world, and remains a powerful inspiration to this day.

Thirty years later, the world witnessed another inspirational (new) media event, featuring another emerging star from East Asia's fighting scene. Like Lee's breakthrough Hollywood movie, this moment was engineered at the intersection of 'East and West' by a (new) media event in California; a powerful moment of hybridity. Yet, despite his incredible performance, which has been viewed by more than 25 million people on YouTube and has been recognised as the most important moment in pro-gaming history, the name of Umehara Daigo has not made it into the consciousness of the general public. As 'The Beast', arguably the greatest fighting-gamer of his generation, Umehara remains a subcultural hero rather than a global icon.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, there are many reasons why these two moments have landed differently in transnational popular culture. However, there

are some important similarities that justify their comparison. In particular, while both participate in a transnational discursive space that features the martial arts (as practice, representation, simulation, simulacrum, and fantasy), both seem to be more than simple instances of entertainment; indeed, both appear to constitute 'events' in Badiou's sense.<sup>11</sup> That is, just as the Bruce Lee 'event' 'enabled (or completed) a profound transformation in Western discourses and in Western bodies' [Bowman 2011: 68], so the Umehara Daigo 'event' enables (or starts) a potentially profound transformation in transnational discourses and individual bodies. To make this as concrete as possible: Bruce Lee's event changed people's aspirations and practices regarding kung fu, inspiring millions into new behaviours, beliefs, and routines of physical discipline; Umehara Daigo's event changed people's aspirations and practices regarding MAVs, inspiring millions into new behaviours, beliefs, and routines of physical discipline. Bruce Lee was the reason a whole generation of people went *Kung Fu Crazy*; Umehara Daigo is the reason a whole generation of people have invested millions of hours and dollars in *Street Fighter* (and other MAVs).

Taking this claim a step further, I would argue that the Lee and Umehara 'events' are not only connected through thematic association but that they are also causally related. That is, the Umehara event *relies* upon the Lee event; Lee is one of the conditions of possibility for Umehara. In this way, we might render these two events as markers in a sequential (or at least an episodic) cultural narrative about the significance and meaning of the martial arts in contemporary societies, culminating in a postmodern embrace of the videogame as its current exemplar.

7 The 'Japanese ideology' implicates the literature/industry of the so-called 'Nihonjinron' (essays about Japanese uniqueness). An early yet still powerful intervention into this ideological field is Peter Dale [1986].

8 With illustrations by SIKU, *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* can be viewed on the project website [<https://www.mentalpraxis.com/virtual-ninja-project.html>].

9 This feature of Bruce Lee's impact is well discussed by Bowman [2010, 2011, 2013].

10 Umehara is listed in the 2011 Guinness Book of World Records (gamer's edition) as the most consistently successful player of all time (with 15 consecutive tournament wins).

11 The salient feature of Badiou's 'event' in this case is neatly elaborated by Bowman [2011: 68] when he describes it as an **encounter** that transforms those participating in the encounter. This makes it importantly different from a form of **communication**.



Figure 1.

### 3. seeing without knowing

a life sparks within  
an awoken memory  
exposed and revealed  
is the ninja alien?  
where is the roiling city?

The episodes illustrated in Figures 1 (right) and 2 (p.56 below) are part of an original sequence of ten (numbers three and five), which comprise the *Virtual Ninja Manifesto*. Each image is accompanied by verse and prose. The sequence is modelled on the *Jūgyūzu* (Ox-Herding Pictures), a sequence usually attributed to Kakuan Shion, a 12th century Chinese Buddhist priest. It is closely associated with the path to Enlightenment in Zen Buddhism.



Image credit: Concept and text by Chris Goto-Jones, art by Siku.

## THE MIRACULOUS REVERSAL PLAY

The 'Beast Event' (or 'Evo Moment #37' as it is sometimes called) refers to a 57-second gameplay sequence in the final round of the first match of the semi-final of the *Street Fighter III: 3<sup>rd</sup> Strike* (1999) competition at the Evolution World Championships 2004, in Pomona, California. The match was between the last surviving American player, Justin Wong, and the great Japanese hope, Umehara Daigo. Wong was playing as Chun-Li and Umehara as Ken. The dynamism of the sequence of play is difficult to describe and should really be *experienced* by watching it.<sup>12</sup> However, in brief, Wong had worn Umehara down to his last pixel of vitality; had Chun-Li successfully landed even one more strike, Umehara's Ken would have collapsed. At this last possible moment, Umehara performed a stunning reversal: he parried 15 consecutive strikes and launched a powerful counter attack that won the match.<sup>13</sup> The crowd went wild. NHK's MAG-NET programme called this the 'miraculous reversal play' (*kiseki no gyakutengeki*), a phrase more commonly used to describe a sudden comeback in baseball.

Paralleling the impact on martial artists of watching Bruce Lee's virtuosity in *Enter the Dragon*, watching this sequence for the first time can be a powerful and inspirational experience for gamers. The influential gaming site *Kotaku* has listed it as the most important pro-gaming event in history.<sup>14</sup> During the *Virtual Ninja Project*, this event was the only pro-gaming moment to be listed as the inspiration that led people to take up gaming or to take gaming more seriously. However, for many people, watching footage of this event is entirely inexplicable and confusing; it is just a blur of cartoonic, videogame martial arts, indistinguishable from the recreational play of children (and adults) every day. People imagine frantic and arbitrary 'button mashing' to produce semi-random outcomes, translated into visual spectacle by a computer. The scene appears *alien*. In the words of Seth Killian (then at Capcom, 2012), 'only around one per cent of people who watch that video really know what's going on'.<sup>15</sup>

This question of accessibility and comprehensibility is a serious one, which is common to many specialised or highly skilled activities. It is related to the question of literacy. In this case, whilst gamers might refer to Umehara as a *gēmu-kami* (gaming-god), the academy has been slow to recognise the importance of Umehara's accomplishment at least partially because the kinds of literacies required to understand the event are not typically the kinds of literacies required of scholars. Nothing textual or narrative is happening; even scholars of videogames would find this 57-second sequence extremely specialised and difficult. In some ways, the situation is not dissimilar from that around the martial arts in the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars struggled to understand *how to understand* the sudden and immense popularity of the martial arts and martial arts cinema.<sup>16</sup> Audiences could see that Bruce Lee was doing something amazing, but most could not really understand *what* he was doing (and some could not *believe* he was really doing what it looked like).

In order to begin to unpack the significance of the 'Beast Event', we might recognise two interrelated kinds of literacy within the game itself. The first is an *abstract literacy* regarding the protocols and control schemes of *Street Fighter III*. The second is the *embodied literacy* required to perform the techniques and movements described by the abstract literacies. In the language of game studies, we might see abstract literacy as the culmination of 'object skills' (including conceptual skills) and 'social skills', and identify embodied literacy with 'locomotive skills'. In general, the literature of videogames studies tends to neglect the importance of locomotive skills and to privilege the categories of object and social play [Myers 2009: 46].<sup>17</sup> At least *prima facie*, this appears to set the critique and appreciation of MAVs apart from the critique and appreciation of physical martial arts.

12 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBVdk1bFddk>

13 In a rather anticlimactic Grand Final, Umehara (again playing as Ken) lost to the enigmatic 'KO' (playing as Yun). For some aficionados, this grand final was of superior quality to the semi-final, which was distinguished only by Umehara's moment of brilliance. It seems to be accepted that the character 'Yun' is extremely difficult to master and that KO's gameplay was extraordinarily skillful. This compares to the relative ease of playing (defensively) with Chun-Li in *Street Fighter III*.

14 <http://kotaku.com/5820907/the-10-best-moments-in-pro-gaming-history>

15 Seth Killian in interview with Penny Arcade, via Capcom Unity: [http://www.capcom-unity.com/brelston/blog/2012/02/24/explained:\\_the\\_mind\\_games\\_of\\_evos\\_world-famous\\_daigowong\\_match](http://www.capcom-unity.com/brelston/blog/2012/02/24/explained:_the_mind_games_of_evos_world-famous_daigowong_match) [accessed 24 February 2012]. Penny Arcade page is now dead.

16 Bowman [2011: 66], citing Bill Brown [1974], suggests that this difficulty was at least partially a result of scholarly reluctance to engage with the importance of the martial arts in an evolving race politics. It is helpful to remember that the technical skills exhibited in the martial arts are also alienating to many observers; this emphasis on embodied knowledge as an essential literacy is a factor that continues to inform and shape the field of martial arts studies today. See, for instance, Farrer & Whalen-Bridge [2011].

17 This tendency reflects an emphasis on the self-contained nature of the virtual site, and the immersion of players therein, on the romantic model of cyberpunk. The privileging of object and social play means that the study of videogaming has (so far) managed to avoid the kind of impasse that has emerged in martial arts studies, wherein forms of embodied knowledge that are generated by practice are valued as authenticating the authority of a scholarly voice. The scholar-practitioner becomes the model of the legitimate, literate inquirer. The role of experiential knowledge in research methodologies has a long and controversial history, running from debates in anthropology about the merits of participant observation through to cutting edge issues about embodied cognition and the 'taboo of subjectivity' [Wallace 2000]. The emerging field of martial arts studies finds itself fully engaged in these controversies.

However, in order to understand the 'Beast Event', it is important to realise that 'one of the more striking characteristics of video games is the extent to which [they] depend upon and require some mastery of locomotor play prior to engagement with the game as a whole, particularly prior to engagement with game rules governing object and conceptual play' [Myers 2009: 49]. Although the amount of physical skill required to play a videogame varies across a wide spectrum, it is clear that the 'interfaces ... are ideological' across the whole range because (no matter how much skill they require) they always serve to mediate the complicated relationship between the player and her avatar, between the actual and the virtual worlds [Rehak 2003: 122]. That is to say, the ways that different control schemes map the behaviours of our physical bodies onto our various virtual bodies 'produce specific experiences of embodiment' such that 'different types of interfaces and different gameworlds mold players' embodied experiences' [Gregersen & Grodal 2009: 66, 65].

In other words, the design of the play-interface and the control scheme is not only a game-play choice but also an ideological choice. The ways in which physical movements of players are mapped onto the movements of avatars have real consequences, not only for the player's access to the gameworld and her literacy therein, but also for the kinds of embodied experiences that feedback from the gameworld into the fleshworld of biological bodies, sensations, minds, and thoughts. As I argue elsewhere [Goto-Jones 2016], the joystick is an event in itself, enabling and creating the permeability of the gameworld, transforming embodied knowledge into virtual actions and vice versa. Hence, while the movements involved may be relatively tiny and subtle – often just precise movements of fingers or thumbs – locomotor play in videogames is at least partially a form of embodied literacy akin to that required in other performative arts (puppetry, dance, martial arts, etc.).

In this regard, MAVs (such as *Street Fighter III*) are particularly interesting. This is because the MAV genre is unique in its 'hardcore' approach to the control interface itself. In general, since the release of *Street Fighter II* in 1991, MAVs have had very complicated control schemes that include 'beginners' techniques (requiring only one or two button presses, simultaneously or in sequence), which may be enough to tempt a casual player into the game or enough to win an early stage.<sup>18</sup>

18 For example, the most recent edition of the popular MAV *BlazBlue Chronophantasma Extend* (2015) includes a 'Stylish Mode' for players who 'don't like to practice and just want to have fun'. This mode, which contrasts with the 'Technical Mode' for players who wish to explore all the possible techniques and combinations, still requires a 30-minute tutorial just to explain (in abstract terms) the range of possible movements, and still requires many hours to learn to actually perform these moves. Pushing even further in this direction is the online game *Rising Thunder* (2015), developed by Seth Killian, which seeks to enhance accessibility and gameplay by mapping complex super moves to single button presses.

Any competent or ambitious player will quickly move on to learn more advanced techniques and combinations, requiring ever more complicated and precise sequencing and timing. Most MAVs include a training mode or 'virtual dōjō' where players spend hours, days, weeks, or even months attempting to master difficult techniques before using them in the game itself [Goto-Jones 2015]. Some gamers talk about entering into 'flow zones', a term used by psychologists to describe heightened states of concentration, immersion, control and a loss of self-consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

It's difficult to explain. I don't really think about what I'm doing, you know? I just sort of do it. I watch the other guy's sword and his stance and then it's like ... phsssst, you know? Sometimes he's dead even before he's even finished his cut. And I'm just standing there, sword already back in its sheath. It's awesome. I guess I've been practicing for so long that it just kind of happens by itself ... I don't need to think about it, and certainly not about my thumbs – if you're worried about your thumbs it's all already over. If anything, it's just his sword in my mind, and as soon as it's about to move I just kill him. That's it.  
[raiden\_nut7, Colorado, USA. 13 July 2012.  
(Discussing *Bushidō Blade*)].

The most important strike of no-thought is when, facing off against your opponent ... your body becomes the striking body, your mind the striking mind, and a powerful strike of your hand emerges from nothing and leaves no trace.  
[Musashi [1645] 1985: 58–59 (Discussing swordsmanship)].<sup>20</sup>

Unlike most other game genres, in which mastering the control scheme is an instrumental achievement that enables access to and exploration of the virtual world or narrative of the game itself (i.e. learning the controls is a pre-condition for play), in MAVs mastery of the control interface is itself the goal. Whether or not the game is enwrapped in a(n often tokenistic) narrative structure, gameplay is invariably in the form of 'stages' or 'matches' between two or more avatars in direct confrontation.<sup>21</sup> Winning a stage relies on spontaneous and fluent mastery of the control scheme and tactics appropriate to the particular

19 The foundational statement of 'flow' was by Csikszentmihalyi [1990]; more recent work in this field has focussed on videogames [eg. Sweetser & Wyeth 2005].

20 The *Virtual Ninja Project* devoted considerable space to exploring the extent to which textual and philosophical parallels exist between the self-understandings of gamers and historical martial artists/thinkers.

21 Excellent work on the subversion of this binary form of combat as a mechanism to problematise notions of identity and immersion has been done by Hutchinson [2007].



characters on stage. Winning may also advance a player to the next narrative stage, but the main significance of victory is that another (usually more challenging) fight will take place. In short, the (narrative) development of the MAV is expressed as the progression through increasingly difficult iterations of the same challenge (a face-to-face fight), requiring ever greater and more complete mastery of the control interface until, at the moment of final victory/mastery, the game is won. Far from being an instrumental pre-condition for play, mastering the controls marks the end of the game: the journey through the game is framed as the warrior's journey to mastery.

The prototype for this structure might well have been Bruce Lee's unfinished (but seminal) film *The Game of Death*, in which Lee must defeat one opponent after the next as he ascends a pagoda towards the greatest challenge of his skill.<sup>22</sup> A similar structure is evident in Lee's 'event' masterpiece, *Enter the Dragon*, in which Lee enters a martial arts tournament on a private island and must fight through increasingly challenging matches before his confrontation with the 'boss' character at the end of the film.<sup>23</sup> Final victory in each case is the ultimate expression of technical (and spiritual) mastery (an idea captured clearly by the subtitle of John Little's Bruce Lee documentary, *A Warrior's Journey*). The honourable ideal of direct, honest combat between two fighters (whether the opponent is another human/avatar or computer controlled) is clearly lauded in both Lee's films and in most MAVs. This 'staged' and direct architectural form quickly became the standard in MAVs, with some franchises (such as *Tekken*, *Street Fighter*, and *Mortal Kombat*) mirroring the shape and tropes of *Enter the Dragon* and *The Game of Death* with considerable fidelity.<sup>24</sup>

22 **The Game of Death** was left incomplete in 1972 when Lee postponed production on it to film **Enter the Dragon**. Five years after his death, a small portion of the footage that Lee had shot was inserted into an original film made by Robert Clouse (the director of **Enter the Dragon**) that bore no resemblance to Lee's original conception. It was not until 2000, in the John Little documentary **Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey**, that the entirety of Lee's original footage was presented to viewers.

23 Quite often, one stage, frequently near the end, involves a confrontation between a fighter and him/herself as the ultimate moment of self-mastery and spiritual accomplishment. *Enter the Dragon* points in this direction with its famous Hall of Mirrors.

24 Many franchises organise their games around a central 'global' martial arts tournament sponsored by an evil rich man bent on collecting and exploiting the powers of the best fighters in the world, just as in **Enter the Dragon**. In the latest version of *Mortal Kombat* (X), there is even a 'Tower Mode' (variations on which have long been a staple of the franchise) in which players fight their way up their own **The Game of Death** edifice towards the ultimate challenge.

This context helps us to unpack the cultural and ideological significance of the 'miraculous reversal play' of 2004 in a more meaningful and literate way, which in turn helps us to make sense of the assertion by Seth Killian [2012] about Umehara's 'event' that 'people can take the playing of games and elevate it into an art form'.

## 57 SECONDS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Prima facie, this 57-second sequence simply shows Umehara's Ken return from the brink of apparently certain death to an improbable victory over Wong's Chun-Li. What we miss in this reduction is the extent of the improbability and thus an appreciation of the level of skill (and artistry) involved in accomplishing it. We might start by noticing that Umehara's Ken (hereafter, UmeKen) had been reduced to the smallest possible amount of vitality – just a single pixel.<sup>25</sup> This meant that even a single strike from Wong's Chun-Li (hereafter, Wong-Li) would have killed him.

Vitality, in *Street Fighter III*, even blocking an attack causes a small amount of damage (known as 'chipping'), which meant that UmeKen would also die if he attempted to block even a single strike (by moving away from Wong-Li as he attacked). So, UmeKen retreats to his corner to gain some space and thinking time. Meanwhile, Wong-Li is considering whether to attack or simply to let the clock run out (and thus win on points). UmeKen will lose if nothing happens, and will lose if Wong-Li makes any contact with him. Wong-Li could just stand there, do nothing, and win.

After a fraction of a second of thought, UmeKen throws two *hadōken* (wave-motion fists) energy-balls across the screen at Wong-Li, who parries them easily. This has two effects on Wong-Li. First, by parrying these attacks, he gains enough energy to launch a 'Super' attack. Second, he seems to find these half-baked attacks irritating, and they make him impatient. Meanwhile, UmeKen maintains his distance on the other side of the screen. A few seconds later, Wong-Li abandons the idea of waiting for the match to time-out and launches into his Super Combo – the deadly *hōyoku sen* (phoenix wing fan) technique. This technique unleashes a tirade of fifteen sequential strikes against UmeKen in rapid succession: in less than four seconds Chun-Li performs seven kicks with

25 Naming conventions for gamers are made more complicated by regional variations in naming. For instance, Umehara is known as Ume in Japan (a contraction of his family name) and as Daigo in the West. The practice of contracting a player's name and synthesizing it with her avatar to produce a unique tag emerges from the arcade scene. Significantly, these tags express different kinds of agents, personalities, and unities: UmeKen (Umehara playing with Ken) is substantively different than UmeRyu (Umehara playing as Ryu), etc.



Figure 2.

### 5. taming the unruly

the screen burns your eyes  
as your fingers crack and click  
not for a moment  
can you give quarter or rest



Image credit: Concept and text by Chris Goto-Jones, art by Siku.

one leg, seven with the other, and then a powerful high-kick to end. If any one of those touch UmeKen (or if he blocks any of them) he will die.

Remarkably, UmeKen keeps cool. Indeed, in hindsight it is clear that he had launched his *hadōken* precisely to enable (and actually to goad) Wong-Li to make this devastating attack. UmeKen was maintaining a critical distance from Wong-Li that enabled him to time his response perfectly. Despite being in a horribly weak situation, UmeKen now had the advantage of knowing what his opponent was about to do (and knowing that he had been lured into doing it unnecessarily). He was playing Wong-Li's mind as well as his body. Killian remarks that Umehara provoked a 'mental break' in Wong.

Nonetheless, UmeKen still had to deal with a relentless Super Combo barrage. In *Street Fighter III*, there is a delicate and precise technique known as the 'parry'. Unlike the 'block' (which is relatively easily accomplished by holding your direction away from an attacker), the 'parry' does not suffer from 'chipping'. To accomplish a parry, a player must move towards each individual strike at the very instant that it is performed. Completing a 'full parry' against Wong-Li's *hōyoku sen* would require UmeKen to complete fifteen separate instantaneous parries within four seconds (in front of a massive live audience in the semi-final of the most important tournament of the year). If he mistimed even one of them, the attack would kill him.

To the great excitement of the crowd, UmeKen successfully performs this miraculous 'full parry' – it is the first time anyone has ever done this in a tournament, and the first time most people found out it was even possible to do it.<sup>26</sup> In hindsight, we can see that UmeKen's control of distance (*maai*) and his opponent's mental state had set up the conditions for this possibility. More than that, however, Umehara had trained long and hard in the performance of the parry, repeating it and repeating it until the movements and the timing were hardwired into his muscle memory: he did not have to think about the performance or enact the techniques consciously. As Killian notes, 'the thing with parrying that Super is that it's so fast you have to be parrying at the time the Super flashes, you can't react to it ... You can't see the flash and start tapping the parry out. You have to be parrying the instant the Super is initiated' [Killian 2012].

But this is not even the end: completing this astonishing 'full parry' is only half of the 'miraculous reversal play'. Knowing that the full parry

would simply leave him standing next to Wong-Li with still only one pixel of vitality left, immediately vulnerable to even the simplest strike (and thus in no better situation than before his incredible performance – indeed, in a worse situation because there is less time left on the clock), UmeKen decides to improvise and make the last parry while jumping in mid-air, despite the ridiculous difficulty of doing this. This apparently unnecessarily flamboyant and dangerous move has a secret genius: knowing that his full parry will have gained him enough on his Super meter to execute a Super counter attack of his own, UmeKen seeks to combo his Super from a jumping kick as he descends from the last parry, thus minimizing the window of opportunity for Wong-Li to respond (if he were even able to respond after the shock of the full parry). As a result, the kick hits Wong-Li squarely and UmeKen follows it immediately with a Super Combo that knocks Wong-Li out of the match with its last strike. Thus, the miraculous reversal play is attained.

The various YouTube videos of this event (and the thousands of comments posted around them) show the crowd going crazy at this amazing accomplishment – it is Muhammad Ali dropping George Foreman in the eighth round of their historic 1974 'Rumble in the Jungle'. But, more Lee than Ali, Umehara retains his characteristic calm; when asked about how he managed this incredible feat, Umehara gives the kind of response that might be expected from Lee: 'I train all the time, so this kind of thing happens. It's just one of my normal techniques, really'.

In fact, Umehara is famed for being cool under pressure. His playing style is noted for its crisp, controlled precision, while he sits in apparent tranquillity at the controls. For some, one of the stand-out moments of the 'Beast Event' is the way that he appears to get angry and frustrated at the start of the 57-second sequence – the live commentator remarks on this in surprise. Umehara later explained that he had become frustrated with Wong-Li's 'turtling' (conservative, defensive tactics). But then he regained his cool and pulled off the miraculous reversal. The association between Umehara's personal tranquillity and his technical prowess is such a strong element of the discourse that the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' franchise produced a T-shirt and poster of this event: 'Keep Calm and Parry On'.<sup>27</sup>

This juxtaposition between Umehara's cool and Ken's explosive dynamism renders the existential force of UmeKen and the cultural force of the 'Beast Event' into powerful experiences for literate audiences (who understand the intimate, embodied relationship between Umehara and Ken). In particular, it is interesting to note

<sup>26</sup> In subsequent releases of *Street Fighter*, this aspirational technique was added to the training regimes in the practice mode.

<sup>27</sup> This phrase is now a common catchphrase in gaming and has been associated with various games and some sports, such as fencing.

the way that this event participates in the 'reiterated rhythmic cycle' observed by Paul Bowman as encapsulating the 'fundamentals of the event of Bruce Lee' [Bowman 2011: 68]. For Bowman, it was Lee's consistent pairing of 'superlative physical violence' and 'supreme calm' in *Enter the Dragon* that affected a transformation in the discourse of the martial arts worldwide, forever tying superior physical technique to moral and spiritual accomplishment: 'Repeatedly, Bruce Lee fights, wins, stops; is utterly calm. He bests hordes of opponents; then sits down in the lotus position' [Bowman 2011: 67-68].<sup>28</sup> In the case of UmeKen, the rhythm is transformed into simultaneity: Ken explodes with 'superlative physical violence' while Umehara sits in 'supreme calm'. The temporal unification of UmeKen in this way provokes fascinating existential questions.

Like Umehara, Lee's skills are represented as being the result of constant physical conditioning until techniques become 'normal' or natural or automatic. Following his ritual triumph early in *Enter the Dragon*, Lee's character explains to a senior Buddhist monk that remaining calm and relaxed in a fight is vital because it allows his body to act by itself: 'A good martial artist does not become tense, but ready. Not thinking, yet not dreaming: ready for whatever may come. When the opponent expands, I contract; when he contracts, I expand; and when there is an opportunity, I do not hit: It hits all by itself. For the monk, this insight reveals that Lee's skills 'have gone beyond the mere physical level ... [to] the point of spiritual insight'. While the content of this 'spiritual insight' remains rather opaque, the Bruce Lee event (as an intervention into the discourse of the martial arts in transnational popular culture) succeeds in associating the sublimation of physical techniques of violence through rigorous training with transcendental goals and virtue; and it succeeds in making this an aspirational model. The Beast Event participates in this discourse in a new technological mode, demonstrating and actually embodying this union of physical and spiritual insight through the simultaneity of violence and calm in UmeKen.

I know loads of people who twitch and throw themselves  
around while they play. They're usually not the ninjas. I'm not

The Beast, but my boyfriend tells me that he sometimes wants to poke me to make sure I'm still breathing. It's the zone, right? It's focus. My body sort of shuts down everything it doesn't need. I sit really still with only my hands still working the buttons. He says I don't even blink. And then, in an instant, the other guy's dead, right. I just finish him without even blinking. The first thing I notice is the rush of victory.  
[HaRun05akura, San Francisco, USA. 25 February 2015].

My wife just laughs at me because I look so tense. She says I freeze up and my eyebrows twitch as I concentrate, and then I sort of spasm – my fingers go and my hands twist and I jerk to the side all at once. But to me this feels like perfect inner calm and then flawless technique. That guy's dead in one cut! That's what I see. That's why I come back for more.  
[hanz0\_24, Hong Kong. 6 April 2012].

Outwardly for the observer, the right shot is distinguished by the cushioning of the right hand as it is jerked back, so that no tremor runs through the body ... But inwardly for the archer himself, right shots have the effect of making him feel that the day has just begun.  
[Herrigel 1953: 75 (*Discussing Zen and the Art of Archery*)].<sup>29</sup>

28 In many ways, this Lee 'event' is a performance of an existing and pervasive theme from the more specialised martial arts discourse of practitioners, transposing it into a superstar event for a global audience. Stephen Chan has observed that certain Japanese martial arts (especially those performed in solo forms) exhibit a cyclical rhythm of stillness and action undergirded by the idea of meditation: 'One meditates while being still; out of this meditation a single, short series of actions arises; the actions resolve themselves in stillness once more; this is visible to the onlooker; the practitioner is of the same meditating mind throughout. Being still, or in action, his (and today, also her) mind is clear as water, and is uncontaminated by conscious or rational thought' [Chan 2000: 72].

29 Herrigel's account has been convincingly (albeit controversially) discredited as overly romantic and naive and as participating in the invention of the modern bushidō myths in the West [Yamada 2001, 2009].

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